札幌医科大学　医療人育成センター紀要　55～66（2010）　　原著論文

Hollywood's Japan: a study of how the Japanese have been depicted in American movies since the mid-1980s

グレゴリー　ウィーラー
札幌医科大学医療人育成センター　教養教育研究部門外国語教室

Open house of the Sapporo Medical University for high school students

Gregory Wheeler
Division of Foreign Languages, Medical Education Center, Sapporo Medical University

In many respects, Hollywood has long been representative of the pulse of American society, with its films reflecting the public mood at the time in which they were produced. In the present work, the author examines how this applies to films that focus on Japan and its culture. By looking at four such films produced in a period spanning from the mid-1980s to the early twenty-first century, it becomes apparent that there are numerous misperceptions and stereotypes about the Japanese held by Americans. In some manner, this is not unexpected, particularly for films from the 1980s, a period in which the countries shared a somewhat uneasy relationship. Unfortunate as it may be, it should not be entirely surprising that such films would portray the Japanese in a negative light. At first glimpse, the more recent film discussed in this paper presents a more balanced view of Japan, seemingly reflecting the improved relations between the two countries. However, although more nuanced, many of the stereotypes remain even in this movie, indicating that there is still much for Hollywood–and subsequently Americans as a whole–to learn about Japan.

Key words: stereotypes, culture, xenophobia, Hollywood cinema

Introduction

In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said laments what he feels are the Western dogmas regarding countries outside the Western hemisphere. Among them is the notion that the West is "rational, developed, humane, superior," as opposed to the Orient, which is "aberrant, undeveloped, inferior (p.300) [1]." Said also writes that many in the West feel the Orient is "something either to be feared...or to be controlled (p.301) [1]." In a later work, he further pontificates on these stereotypes, writing that "Orientals" are viewed as a single entity, easily swept away in generalizations, almost all of which taint them under the specter of inferiority.[2]

Said does not specifically refer to Japan in his writings; rather, he writes on what he believes are the prevailing attitudes present in Western studies of Arabs and Islam. However, it is unfortunately all too simple to apply his theories to Japan. Americans (for the purposes of this study I concentrate mostly on American images rather than those from the all encompassing West), when imagining Japan have almost always focused on how supposedly different the country and its people are from everyone else. Japan is especially easy to make sweeping generalizations about because it is repeatedly referred to as a homogeneous country. From scholars such as Ruth Benedict [3], whose post-war work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was hugely influential for later studies on Japan, to Edwin Reischauer [4], former Harvard professor and ambassador to Japan, we are informed countless times that, in Reischauer's words, "Unity and homogeneity characterize the Japanese....Today few if any large masses of people are as homogenous as the Japanese (p.8) [4]."

Not only scholars, but the media also perpetuates the notion of Japan as essentially a monolith. Be it National

Public Radio's long-time Japan correspondent Eric Weiner informing us, "Because Japan was virtually isolated from the outside world for centuries, its population remained ethnically homogenous[5]," to *Time* correspondent Tim Larimer reporting on the "innate sense of cohesiveness in this homogenous nation[6]," the Japanese people are constantly grouped together as a single entity. Despite the existence of numerous scholarly works that dispute the notion of Japanese homogeneity[7-10], popular belief has always been that Japan exists as a collective identity. As such, it is fairly simple to make sweeping generalizations. Furthermore, in keeping with Said's theories, these generalizations are almost always designed to portray the country in question in a negative manner.

For years, nowhere has this been more apparent than in Hollywood depictions of Japan. As movie critic Mark Schilling writes, "Americans have long had a fascination with Japan in the movies – and Hollywood has long been happy to give us the Japan it thinks we want[11]." The present study examines the Japan that Hollywood has created and how they are a reflection of overall attitudes and beliefs concerning Japan when they were produced. The four films to be discussed–*Gung Ho* (1986), *Black Rain* (1989), *Rising Sun* (1993) and *Lost in Translation* (2003)[12-15]–were selected because they were commercial successes and purport to be realistic portrayals of contemporary Japanese culture and beliefs at the time in which they were produced. Certainly, films such as *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) also enjoyed success at the box office, but they are in essence period pieces, depicting Japan's past history. Additionally, *The Fast and the Furious 3: Tokyo Drift* (2006) was a commercial success, but one would be hard-pressed to argue that its main intention is to present a study on Japanese culture, rather than entertain audiences with cars that move fast.

Gung Ho and the early/middle 1980s

The tagline in 1986's *Gung Ho*– "When East meets West, the laughs shift into high gear!" –lets audiences know immediately that this is a film about cultural conflict. The Japanese in *Gung Ho* are an odd and amusing people, obsessed with work, and arrogantly assume their superiority over Americans. The film begins with Hunt Stevenson (played by Michael Keaton) en route to Japan, his mission being to convince Japanese automobile manufacturer Assan (the name likely meant to be a humorous play on Nissan) to open a factory in Hadleyville, a small and economically struggling Pennsylvania town. Although his presentation is a disaster–he is late, and his attempts at humor fall flat in the somber boardroom–somehow Stevenson's pitch is successful, and the Japanese arrive in town shortly afterwards, greeted with raucous cheers by the grateful populace.

As the movie progresses, however, the gratitude the American workers feel toward their benefactors is quickly displaced, first by bemused puzzlement, and then contempt at what they feel are the odd customs of the Japanese. As the differences between East and West become more apparent, tensions continue to rise, culminating in the American workers going on strike, with Assan retaliating by shutting down the factory and threatening to return to Japan. Fortunately, by the end of the film, the differences are resolved, the crisis is averted, and the Japanese and American workers learn to work in harmony with each other.

Ostensibly a piece that is meant to showcase in amusing fashion cultural differences, and how change is necessary from both the American and Japanese sides, the movie makes it clear that the Japanese are the ones who need to make the more substantial alterations to their lifestyles. In particular, we learn that the Japanese are absolute sticklers for rules, and do not allow room for creativity. Failure to abide by these rules results in constant berating, and in the case of one American employee, demotion to custodial duties. "We are a team. No man is special," the Japanese constantly remind the Americans. As such, being part of a team means sacrifices must be made for the company, and workers are expected to do vast amounts of (unpaid) overtime to demonstrate their loyalty. Spending time with one's family takes a much less important role. When the head of the Japanese delegate is asked about how his family feels about life in the United States, for example, he simply responds that he has not bothered to ask them.

Dedication to the group manifests itself in all aspects. Even leisurely activities are performed only with the group in mind by the Japanese. A friendly softball game between the Japanese and American workers quickly degenerates when the Japanese team (dressed in full uniform, as opposed to the Americans who are clothed in various forms of t-shirts and shorts) arrives, and

immediately begins a series of tightly organized warm-up drills to the absolute bewilderment of the American players and spectators. Worse, once the game begins, the Japanese players begin bunting during their turns at bat, the batters sacrificing their own chances at glory in order to advance base runners. The free-swinging Americans are aghast at this development, believing the Japanese to be destroying the spirit of camaraderie.

We also learn that the Japanese have almost nothing but contempt for American workmanship. "Defect," barks one manager to an American assembly worker. When the American protests, he is informed (in broken English), "In Japan if there is defect, worker is ashamed. He stays night to fix." The obvious implication is that if the American does not share this dedication, his work ethic should be called into question. In another scene, four Japanese managers (viewers do not actually see any Japanese working on the assembly line until the end of the film) are examining a small model automobile when it suddenly falls apart. "American car," one manager announces to the amusement of everyone else.

The 'American car' scene also provides another stereotype of the Japanese: they are all similar in resemblance. In the previous scene in the movie, Stevenson is talking with Kenji, who is one of the Japanese managers, and two American workers. Kenji is apparently causing problems for the American workers, and Stevenson assures them he will go straight to the Japanese boss and straighten out matters. From there, we flash to the scene in which the four Japanese managers share their laugh over American workers' incompetence. Almost immediately afterwards, Stevenson arrives and greets them on his way to meet the boss to discuss the problem Kenji has created. The problem lies in the fact that Kenji is one of the four Japanese managers Stevenson greets. Given the time frame, it would be next to impossible for him to have been in the room with the other three Japanese managers. Certainly, this could simply be a careless editing mistake. Even so, it reinforces the unfortunate (and inaccurate) image that the Japanese all look the same.

Other than Stevenson's girlfriend Audrey, women have almost no role in the movie, and in fact we never learn the names of any of the Japanese female characters. We do learn that Japanese women know their place in society, and it is one below that of the men, at least when it comes to business. At dinner one night at the house of the Japanese boss, attended by Stevenson and Audrey, as well as the high-ranking Japanese workers and their wives, it is announced that before dessert there is some business that needs to be discussed. Hearing this, the Japanese wives silently stand and leave the room. Stevenson's girlfriend remains, to the discomfort and irritation of the Japanese.

There are other cheap gags throughout, all of which ridicule the Japanese and their customs. When the Japanese contingent first arrives in Hadleyville, the town literally rolls out the red carpet. Seeing this, the managers and their families remove their shoes before stepping upon it. In the same scene, the leader of the Japanese delegate is asked to give a speech, but the microphone is placed entirely too high for him. In another instance, we see the Japanese workers bathe outdoors every morning very publicly in the town river. Finally, the film does not hesitate to poke fun at the English prowess–or lack thereof–of the Japanese. There are silly English mistakes throughout, one example being when the Japanese secretary tells Stevenson that he should not bother the boss, because "he between a rock and a hard-on."

Toward the end of the movie there is finally an attempt to address the idea that the problems are not only with the Japanese. Addressing the people of Hadleyville at the town fair, referring to the Japanese, Stevenson says, "They're kicking our butts, and that ain't luck....The great old American do-or-die spirit. Yeah, it's alive, but they got it!" It is, however, too little, too late. Moreover, his message loses credibility only a few scenes later, when the head of the Japanese delegate complains, "We work too damn hard! This is not our lives; this is a factory! Our friends, our families should be our lives!"

Ultimately, the movie concludes with both sides realizing they have things they can learn from each other. However, it is obvious which side needs to make the greater changes. The review from *The Chicago Reader* sums up the attitude of the movie nicely: "The grand finale exhorts Americans and Japanese to work together to solve their problems, but from where I was sitting it looked like the Japanese just gave in to what is portrayed as the moral and emotional superiority of the American way of life[16]."

Gung Ho proved to be a box-office hit, opening at number one during its first week, and remaining in the top ten for over two months. Its success even led to a short-lived television series.

Despite the ridiculous stereotypes, overall, this was intended as a fun film, and by the conclusion the Japanese are portrayed not as mean-spirited people, but rather those who simply need to relax a bit. In many ways, this was in keeping with the times. Japan was not really the adversary yet in the mid-1980s. (That honor still belonged to the Soviet Union) Certainly, there was discontent about its vast trade surplus with the United States, and there was also pressure on the country to open up to more American imports. However, Japan had a close relationship with the United States, and was agreeable to numerous requests, including a rapid realignment of dollar-yen currencies in the mid-1980s. The end result of this was a rapid rise in the cost of American products in Japan, something the Japanese government (at the request of the United States) offset.

It was also helpful that the two leaders of the country shared friendly relations. The bond between President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, dubbed by the Japanese media as the 'Ron-Yasu' friendship due to their proclivity to call each other by their first names, seemed genuinely solid. Reagan, simply through his personality, may also have been instrumental in keeping terms between Japan and the United States friendly. His public demeanor was always so remarkably upbeat, and he was so extremely talented at infusing his overwhelming optimism onto the American public that all was well in the United States (witness his wildly successful "It's morning again in America" re-election campaign), that perhaps the fact that another country was challenging the United States economically did not truly worry people.

Black Rain and the end of the 1980s

By 1989, when *Black Rain* was produced, the mood toward Japan had changed considerably. Reagan was gone, replaced by the less charismatic George Bush. Bush carried little of the gravitas of Reagan, especially early in his presidency, and despite his decorated military past, he was forced to contend with an image of weakness. *Newsweek* magazine's infamous 1988 cover of Bush riding a speedboat, under the caption, "Fighting the Wimp Factor" did not help lend an image of strength.

Moreover, the position of prime minister was proving to be tenuous in Japan. Nakasone had been replaced by Takeshita Noboru in 1987, who served in the position for fewer than two years before a scandal caused him to resign. He was succeeded by Uno Sōsuke, who himself barely lasted two months before stepping down due to a scandal of his own, and was replaced by Kaifu Toshiki. Such discontinuity made it difficult for any sort of strong bond to be formed between the American president and Japanese prime minister.

Concerning economic issues, the crash of the American stock market on October 19, 1987−known today as Black Monday−served as an indication that perhaps the American economy was not indestructible after all. Although fears of an immediate recession proved to be unfounded, it took nearly two years for stocks to reach their previous levels. The crash had little effect on the Japanese stock exchange, however, which continued growing at a rapid rate. Moreover, the United States' trade deficit with Japan continued to increase, further intensifying American beliefs that Japan was engaging in unfair trade practices.

In the midst of this, the Japanese emperor Hirohito passed away on January 7, 1989. With his death, and the controversy surrounding President Bush's decision to attend his funeral, debate concerning Hirohito's complicity during the Second World War and ugly memories of the war once again arose.

It was in this atmosphere that *Black Rain* opened in September 1989. *Black Rain* teams actor Michael Douglas, playing the role of American detective Nick Conklin with his Japanese counterpart Matsumoto Masahiro (played by Takakura Ken) as they roam the streets of Osaka trying to solve a counterfeiting ring involving rival *yakuza* gangs. Echoing themes that played in *Gung Ho*, *Black Rain* focuses on the perceived cultural clash between Conklin's American tendency for individuality against Matsumoto, who believes in doing things the Japanese way (i.e., follow the rules at all times, and work with the group). There is no doubt where director Ridley Scott's sympathies lie, and Matsumoto in the end realizes that Conklin's counsel ("Sometimes you've gotta go for it") indeed makes sense, and that perhaps the Japanese have something to learn from the Americans after all.

It takes a while for this revelation to occur, however, as Matsumoto is initially convinced of Japanese

superiority. In one early scene, Matsumoto informs Conklin of what he feels are flaws concerning the United States. After the Second World War, Matsumoto tells the detective, American soldiers were wise and generous, and the United States was a tremendous benefactor to Japan. Present day Americans, however, are corrupt and lazy, and Japan, in fact, is the new power: "Music and movies are all America is good for. We make the machines. We build the future. We won the peace!" Outraged, Conklin lashes back, shouting, "And if there was one of you guys who had an original idea, you'd be so tight you couldn't even pull it out of your ass!"

The theme of Japanese power and influence is rife throughout the entire movie, present from the opening shot, in which an image of a large red sun gradually fades into a large statue of a globe. The unstated message is clear: Japan is intent on being number one, and is convinced that such a goal is easily attainable. Later, the head of one of the yakuza gangs, when explaining the reason for the counterfeiting ring (it turns out to be revenge on the United States for the Hiroshima atomic bombing), raves about the quality of the counterfeit bills his gang creates, and Japanese superiority in general: "The new ones [bills] will be like everything we make: Perfect." He continues to get digs into American society, dismissing his rival Sato as one who "might as well be an American. His kind respect just one thing: money."

However, although the Japanese in *Black Rain* may feel they are rich and powerful, the film makes sure to assure American audiences that in reality, they are not people to emulate. For starters, they have problems with cleanliness. Economically on the rise, Japan is also filthy, as we are less than subtly shown in one scene from the viewpoint of the window of an airplane flying over Osaka, in which the camera focuses for nearly thirty seconds on smoke billowing from countless factories on the horizon. The whole city of Osaka, in fact, seems to be smoky at all times (although to be fair, that seems to be a trademark in nearly all of Scott's films).

The movie is a never ending wave of stereotypes. We learn that strict adherence to rules takes priority at all times, even when doing so gets the police nowhere in their attempts to capture the villain Sato. As Conklin snarls at Matsumoto, when the Japanese detective claims they have to follow the rules, "Hey, look pal, I've seen Sato's work, ok? He ain't following your program!" It quickly emerges that the Japanese police are a study of incompetence. They have followed the gang war between Sato and his former boss for some time, but are clueless as to how to proceed, and in fact, about the root of the conflict until Conklin arrives and quickly discovers the counterfeiting ring. Their ineptness is likely due to the fact, as Conklin points out, that they are not really police at all, but rather, merely "suits."

The image of the impenetrable Japanese is also present at all times. In one scene, Conklin is questioning Kate, a bartender from Chicago who has lived in Japan for a number of years. Because of this longevity, she is portrayed as an expert on the country, and she advises Conklin to stay out of the police investigation of the gang war, because he cannot possibly comprehend his surroundings. "Look," she says, "I've been living in this country for seven years and I still can't read the headlines. 'Yes' means 'no,' 'maybe' means 'never.'" She further informs the detective, "No one's gonna help a *gaijin*." When Conklin inquires about this term's meaning, she replies, "A stranger, a barbarian, a foreigner. Me and you." The message is clear: Conklin is in a strange land, with people who think differently from the Americans.

Similar to *Gung Ho*, we learn that the Japanese, particularly the men, are socially inept even during leisure activities. In one scene, Conklin and his American partner Charlie Vincent are sitting in a large bar, flanked by beautiful Japanese women. Vincent notices Matsumoto sitting alone at the bar's counter, drinking something colorful, complete with a little umbrella. Although it is unclear what Conklin and Vincent are drinking, it is clearly something more befitting for men. Vincent calls Matsumoto over, and in an effort to get him to loosen up, advises him to "lose the Kmart tie," and presents him with his own flashy one. Next, after ridiculing a Japanese businessman's flat karaoke rendition of *That's Amore*, Vincent takes the stage himself, dragging Matsumoto with him, and does a spirited performance of a Ray Charles piece, with Matsumoto trying hard to keep up, but looking awkward and stiff in comparison.

Also similar to *Gung Ho*, there is a half-hearted attempt at balance. Conklin, who we learn is under suspicion (and, as it turns out, guilty) of corruption seems to regain his honor through the counsel of

Matsumoto. At the same time, he learns a bit about humility. In one of the more unintentionally amusing scenes near the end of the movie, after Matsumoto and Conklin have teamed up to capture Sato, there is an awards ceremony in the police station. As the superintendent faces Conklin, dramatic music begins playing in the background, swelling instants later when, in response to the superintendent's bow, Conklin lowers his head a few inches. Presumably, we are supposed to realize from this that Conklin has discovered there is some good in the Japanese manner after all. Unfortunately, it is negated moments later when Conklin says his farewells to Matsumoto at the airport. Perhaps so excited by what he has learned, he starts to bow once again, but is stopped by the Japanese detective, who sticks out his hand instead. "Good friends do this," he tells our hero. Once again, the ways of the West triumph.

Another turn for the worse: *Rising Sun* and the early 1990s.

If the atmosphere was bad in 1989, it was even worse at the beginning of the next decade, exacerbated by a number of events. In the United States, the quick recovery from Black Monday proved to be fleeting, and the economy by the early 1990s was in recession. Japan had economic troubles of its own with the crash of its bubble, but to the American public it still appeared much stronger than the United States. Moreover, there was considerable resentment toward the Japanese for their apparent inclination to buy iconic American landmarks. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, institutes such as the Rockefeller Center, Pebble Beach golf course, and Hollywood studios Columbia and Universal Pictures were all under Japanese ownership. Although Japan was well behind England regarding investment in the United States, its so-called "trophy" purchases provoked far greater angst. Barron [17], for example, reported on a woman standing outside Rockefeller Center selling T-shirts that read, "Welcome to Wokafellar Center." In the same article, another tourist who came to see Rockefeller Center echoed views so prevalent from *Black Rain*: "You want to know the truth−they're getting back at us for the atomic bomb.... What we did to their cities, now they are trying to do to us by taking over our city[17]." His recommendation was that the United States fight back: "It's time to play hardball. We worked hard for this, and now they're taking it away. Soon everyone will be working for them[17]." Perhaps ironically, the tourist at the time was a sales worker for Nissan. Sadly, his statements were not just the rants of a solitary person paranoid of a Japanese takeover. The idea of fighting Japan was one that was gaining credibility among academics as well. Political science professor George Friedman and Meredith Lebard[18] suggested that the situation between Japan and the United States was similar to that in 1941, and mounting tensions could well lead to an actual war.

Tensions were further heightened in part due to how Japan's actions concerning the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq were interpreted. Due to the manner in which Japan's Constitution was interpreted at the time, there were strict limitations on what actions its military could partake in. As such, Japan felt it was unable to send troops to join the allied forces as they prepared for battle against Iraq. In lieu of troops, Japan provided funding (initially one billion, but eventually nearly fourteen billion dollars). However, Japan's unwillingness to participate actively fostered resentment among many in the United States, who felt insulted by this so-called checkbook diplomacy.

That Japan was also seen to be asserting a more prominent role in its global position brought it a good deal of criticism as well, especially when unauthorized English translations of *The Japan that Can Say No* came to light[19]. Co-written by Sony chairman Morita Akio (who declined to have his section included in the subsequent official translation) and Japanese politician Ishihara Shintaro, it was a series of essays that seemed to advocate that Japan distance itself somewhat from the United States. Ishihara's commentary, in particular, fueled anger against Japan. He claimed, for example, that the United States was dependent on Japanese technology, especially with the production of semiconductors. He suggested Japan should take advantage of this position by threatening to share its technology with the Soviet Union, rather than the United States. Additionally, he made numerous spurious remarks about the faulty education system in the United States, and how Americans were guilty of racism and cultural imperialism. Many of his claims were considered ridiculous and denounced both in Japan and the United States, but provoked anger nevertheless.

Remarks from Japanese politicians also gave rise to feelings that the United States was being belittled.

Japan's Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi's supposed remarks in February 1992 about Americans lacking a work ethic also flamed anger against Japan. Making matters worse, Writing in *Time*, Castro[20] informed readers that Miyazawa had told the Japanese parliament that not only did Americans lack a work ethic, but they were also lazy and greedy. Moreover, the piece also claimed that other politicians were making even more insulting comments about Americans. Democratic Senator Ernest Hollings responded to these perceived insults the following March, when he suggested to workers in South Carolina that they "should draw a mushroom cloud and put underneath it, 'Made in America by lazy and illiterate workers and tested in Japan[21].'"

Memories of World War Two continued to foster ill feeling toward the Japanese. In 1989, it was Hirohito's death. Toward the end of 1991, it was the fiftieth anniversary of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor that once again helped renew images of a power-hungry Japan. Amongst the countless recollections of that event, the media was quick to point out that present-day Japan appeared to be waging a new kind of war. Hillenbrand and Walsh[22], for example, declared, "Many Americans see Japan's economic juggernaut as a continuation of war by other means. In some views Japan is already achieving what it failed to win by force of arms: a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." CBS News, in a December 2 broadcast[23], informed audiences, "Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor mobilized America against a Japanese military machine bent on dominating the Pacific. Fifty years later, a Japanese economic machine is bent on dominating large parts of the U.S. economy."

Finally, President Bush's ill-fated 1992 trip to Japan also fueled resentment, in that many interpreted it as him begging Japan to provide jobs for American workers. He fell far short of his stated goal of increasing the amount of American exports to Japan (which, he claimed, would result in more jobs for Americans). Compounding the situation, at a private dinner at Prime Minister Miyazawa's residence, apparently overcome with fatigue, Bush collapsed and vomited. One of the enduring images of the incident is of Bush's head lying on Miyazawa's lap, hardly an image of strength for Bush or the United States.

Into this bleak atmosphere came *Rising Sun*, based on Michael Crichton's similarly titled novel. Set in Los Angeles, it is the story of two detectives–John Connor (played by Sean Connery) and Web Smith (Wesley Snipes)–as they investigate the murder of a young American woman in the building of the Japanese corporation Nakamoto. Connor is an expert on all things Japanese, which is fortunate, because throughout the movie the detectives have to struggle against resistance from the Japanese, who always seem to be at least one step in front of them.

Similar to *Black Rain*, *Rising Sun* plays with the image of the sun in its opening shot. In this case, the sun fades to reveal a swarm of ants. Perhaps there was no hidden meaning present, but it recalled former French Prime Minister Edith Cresson's famous 1991 comments about the supposed ant-like qualities of the Japanese. Cresson was no stranger to controversial remarks concerning Japan. Earlier, during her stint as Minister of European Affairs, she famously declared, "Japan is an adversary that doesn't play by the rules, and has an absolute desire to conquer the world[24]."

As the scene progresses, we get a sense of this Japanese feeling of power. A young Japanese man and his henchmen are in a bar, singing karaoke. The henchmen are all wearing dark suits and glasses, and are obviously meant to appear foreboding. All the customers in the bar are Japanese, and the bar itself is designed to look as Japanese as possible, complete with Japanese-style sliding doors and windows. Watching the young man and his gang singing is the sole non-Japanese patron, a young, attractive American woman, who is obviously bored. She stands and walks out of the bar, much to the displeasure of the singer, who informs her that he was having fun, and warns her, "Don't ever try that again." Moments later, after forcing her into his car, he mutters to himself, "*Maittana, gajiin ha*" ("foreigners [outsiders] cause such trouble"). As they drive off to destination unknown, a subtitle appears on the screen, informing us that they are not actually in any big Japanese city, but rather Los Angeles. The point is clear: it makes no difference where the Japanese are. They are always above the rest of the world, and Americans are the outsiders even in their own country.

This theme of Japanese influence and power is evident throughout the movie. The Japanese, we learn, can buy or control anything they want in the United States, from the police, whom they appear to have in their pockets, to major technological corporations. One scene in particular, in which the detectives have a

conversation with Jim Donaldson, whom they believe to be the chairman of Hamaguri Corporation ("We did some work together when this was the Donaldson Corporation," Connor muses), is typical of the way in which the Japanese are portrayed to have absolute power. Hamaguri is a high-tech company, and the detectives are hoping to get some information from Donaldson, but meet with little success; although Donaldson is still the CEO, he is out of the loop. When Connor suggests as much, Donaldson justifies the situation, declaring, "Look, we sold it. They own it. People who own things are entitled to do whatever they want with them."

If Japan wants it, Japan can get it. Even Japan-expert Connor himself is affected by the influence of the Japanese, when he is offered–and accepts–an exclusive country-club membership by a Japanese company. It is as if the United States has become Japan-west. As Connor explains to his younger colleague Webb as they enter the premises of the murdered young woman, "Pay attention. This isn't America." He is specifically referring to the brothels they are about to enter, but he may as well be talking about the entire country.

Where do Americans fit into the scheme of things? Once again, they are dismissed as inferior. "It pisses me off," complains one technology expert, referring to Japanese attitudes toward the Americans. "They expect us to be sloppy Americans. They think we will not be thorough, not be intelligent."

Much of the above is similar in spirit to *Gung Ho* and *Black Rain*. *Rising Sun*, however, takes matters further, picking apart one aspect Americans had clung to as proving their superiority to the Japanese. Americans, troubled for years with the rising influence of Japan, had always been able to reassure themselves with the notion that although the Japanese may have been enjoying some economic success at their expense, they were socially inept, incapable of living life to the fullest. Moreover, they were small and physically weak. They had terrible eyesight. They had buck teeth. In *Gung Ho*, for example, the Japanese protagonists are small and skinny (with one heavyset exception), and most wear oversized, thick glasses. In *Black Rain*, Matsumoto is not portrayed nearly as comically, but he is slender and quite a bit older than both American detectives. He is no threat to American masculinity. In the bar scenes, the Japanese women all gravitate to the charismatic Vincent. Additionally, although the beautiful bartender Kate may show contempt toward Conklin at times, he is the one she kisses passionately near the end of the film. All in all, the Americans are socially adjusted, and the Japanese are a group of awkward misfits.

That changes in *Rising Sun*. At a party held at the Nakamoto building, we see older Japanese men accompanied by beautiful American models (once again, the idea of the Japanese being able to buy anything comes to mind). There are scenes in which numerous young attractive American women are being kept as mistresses, servicing the Japanese *yakuza*. Finally, and most disheartening, in the character of Eddie Sakamoto, the *karaoke* singer from the beginning of the movie, the preconceived notions of the clumsy Japanese are shattered. Not only is Sakamoto extremely wealthy and powerful, he is handsome, strong, and charismatic. At a party, he–not the American senator who theoretically should have been the most powerful person present–is the one dancing with the beautiful American women, and the recipient of admiration from all those in attendance. In another scene, two American women are with him at his house, both naked. One is lying flat on the ground, covered with sushi pieces, while the other allows Sakamoto to lick sake from her nipples. Both appear ready and willing to do his any bidding. Worse, Sakamoto takes all of this for granted and even appears distracted at times, finding it necessary to make a phone call. For Americans hoping to reassure themselves that at least in terms of having a good time, the Japanese still had much to learn, Sakamoto is their worst fear.

Fortunately, as it turns out, Sakamoto is a *good* Japanese person. Seeing the sacrifice Webb makes for him at one point, protecting him even when it puts his family in harm's way, Sakamoto allies himself with the detectives, and fights to his death against the *bad* Japanese causing many of the troubles.

Based on Michael Crichton's controversial best-seller, director Philip Kaufman claimed that he was trying to tone down the critical stance toward Japan so evident in the novel. "I just thought the movie should focus more on the plot, characters and the murder story[25]." Indeed, there are some changes from the original novel, the most dramatic perhaps being that the murderer in the movie, unlike in Crichton's work, is American, rather than Japanese. Moreover, a xenophobic American detective (played by Harvey

Keitel) who spouts the greatest amount of anti-Japanese rhetoric in the movie is portrayed as a buffoon, not somebody to be taken seriously. Still, the stereotypes and insults persist. If Kaufman believed his film to be free from biases, it would be interesting to know what he considered to be truly anti-Japanese.

Lost in Translation: A more realistic depiction?

After *Rising Sun*, there was a dearth in Hollywood of films with a focus on Japan. As the American economy began to improve, and that of Japan continued to sink, interest in Japan appeared to recede. This is not to imply that Japan bashing faded away entirely; it still existed, if perhaps somewhat muted. Morris[26], in his PhD Doctorate on the history of Japan bashing, provides numerous references to suggest that criticism of Japan never truly disappeared. He mentions, for example, Fingleton[27], who insisted that Japan was actually hiding its true economic progress, in effect "blindsiding" the United States. Additionally, longtime critic of Japan Ivan Hall[28] decried what he considered "Japan's phony slump," and warned against the United States being fooled by this. However, much of the criticism of Japan centered on the idea that its economic slump was likely to affect the rest of the world adversely. In other words, in a few short years, Japan went from being censured for its economic success to being criticized for its lack thereof. Overall, however, once Japan was no longer considered a threat, Hollywood interest in the country appeared to fade.

Perhaps because Japan was no longer considered an adversary to be feared, people could study its culture in a more reasonable light. Since the turn of the century, in fact, knowledge about Japan is seemingly higher than ever. Today, there are thousands of Americans living and working in Japan. Japanese animation and movies, particularly those of the horror genre, are regarded with great respect, with Hollywood quick to make their own versions. More and more Japanese athletes are testing their prowess in the American baseball major leagues, and fans seem eager to learn information about the country from which they hail. In the entertainment industry, even Hollywood seems to be opening its doors to actors from Japan, as the recent success of stars such as Watanabe Ken and Kikuchi Rinko would attest. With the populace constantly connected to the internet, with sites such as Youtube making it possible to view images from all over the world, gaining knowledge about Japan is easier than ever. As a result, one would expect that this would lead to more accurate portrayals of the country when Hollywood eventually deigned to once again produce a movie with a Japan bent.

That time came in 2003 when *Lost in Translation* arrived in theaters. It was a modest hit, but was one of the most critically acclaimed movies of the year. It garnered four academy award nominations, including those for best picture, director and actor, and won for original screenplay. Director Sophia Coppela professed a love for Tokyo, where the production takes place, and said that one of her reasons for making the movie was to express these feelings. Many shared her enthusiasm, and the film was often hailed as the most accurate depiction of Japan ever expressed through a Hollywood film. At long last, it appeared, Hollywood had done right by Japan.

In the midst of its overall acclaim, however, came accusations of racism from a small minority. *Lost in Translation* was accused of pandering to the old ugly stereotypes about the physical and mental capacities of the Japanese. Sadly, a close examination of the film shows that this minority has numerous valid points. *Lost in Translation* has much in common with the films discussed earlier.

The movie centers around two main characters. One is Bob (played by Bill Murray), a once famous actor whose better days are behind him. He is in Tokyo shooting whisky commercials (receiving two million dollars in the process). The other character is Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), who is in Tokyo with her photographer husband. Suffering from insomnia, and both struggling with their marriages, neither character is entirely pleased to be in Japan. They meet, and apparently recognizing in each other a kindred soul, bond in a country whose language and customs are mysterious to them.

The scenes that have generated the most criticism mostly rely on visual gags. Throughout *Lost in Translation*, the Japanese are portrayed as short in stature. Played for humorous effect, there are numerous instances that show Bob towering over everybody else in elevators, or struggling to take a shower in his room because the shower head is too low. Perhaps trying to offset claims that such scenes portray Japan negatively, Charlotte complains once to Bob, "You're too tall." This is, however, a throwaway line, and a rather lame

attempt to redress the situation.

Another controversial scene is when a prostitute visits Bob's hotel room unannounced. She butchers her *l* and *r* pronunciation ("Lip my stockings"), and ends up on the floor thrashing about as a disconcerted Bob looks on. The image of the little people with bad pronunciation of English is a return to the days of *Gung Ho*. On the other hand, *Lost in Translation* tries to show us that more often than not, rather than bad English, nobody in Japan speaks *any* English, and that includes those in the medical profession. When Charlotte goes to the hospital to have an injured toe examined, the physician utters not one word of English to her, although it is plain to all that she knows no Japanese. Granted, the purpose of the movie is to show how Bob and Charlotte feel alienated and out of sorts in a different land, and having a Japanese doctor converse with her in even semi-fluent English would have diminished the effect. Yet anyone who has ever been to a hospital in Japan knows that the majority of doctors are more than eager to converse–at least a bit–in English.

A scene with an overly enthusiastic Japanese talk-show host is yet another example in which the Japanese are portrayed as odd. Matthew, as the host is called, with his brightly dyed blond hair, multi-colored outfits (the studio, as well, is garishly bright) is a visual assault on the senses. His mannerisms are bizarre as well. Within a few seconds of meeting Bob, he does a little dance for him, and has him participate in various unusual visual gags. Defenders of *Lost in Translation* may point out that Matthew actually exists, and that his show is normally conducted in such a manner. The problem, however, is that he is referred to in the movie as the "Japanese Johnny Carson." Carson, of course, was considered the king of late-night television in the United States, one reason being, as Ventre[29] wrote upon the *Tonight Show's* host's death, "Carson was everyman, with charisma." If Matthew is Japan's version of everyman, the Japanese must be an odd people indeed.

In contrast to the colorful Matthew, the majority of the Japanese in the film keep their distance from the two main characters. A scene toward the end of the movie with Bob and Charlotte sitting in a *shabu-shabu* restaurant gives us an example of the eerily distant Japanese. Throughout the scene, as the two order their food and when it is brought to their table, the women waiting on them speak not one word. The silence speaks volumes in the manner in which Bob and Charlotte find themselves surrounded by unfriendly faces.

In another cheap bit, during the restaurant scene, Charlotte looks at the photos that appear on the menu of the six various different plates of meat available, and complains, "I can't tell the difference." It seems that not only do the Japanese look alike, their food does as well. In her defense, of course she cannot find differences in the photographs. This is because there are no differences. It is clearly the same photograph, copied six times.

We also learn that the Japanese are somewhat deviant sexually. When a couple of Charlotte's male Japanese friends arrange a place to meet, the location is a strip bar (a bit of information they neglected to mention to her). Moreover, apparently too impatient for Charlotte to arrive, the men both go to a private room for lap dances.

There is a plethora of other scenes showing the peculiarities of the Japanese. There is the young boy in the arcade cavorting wildly; the hopeful politician hopping around like a rabbit outside a van driven by his campaign team; the condescending commercial director, imploring Bob to "raise his tension," and at the same time act as if he were greeting an old friend; the almost obligatory dash through a pachinko parlor (it would be a challenge to find any modern Hollywood movie set in present-day Japan that did not find a way to include a pachinko shot); the business cards thrust in unison upon an overwhelmed Bob at his arrival; the taxi that drives away when the driver realizes the potential patrons are foreigners; the men on the subway reading perverted comic books; they are all strange, and all noted with smug contempt by Charlotte and especially Bob. In fact, the only things that are apparently good about Japan are from its past. As Day[30] writes in her scathing review of the film in *The Guardian*, "Coppola is respectful of ancient Japan. It is depicted approvingly, though ancient traditions have very little to do with the contemporary Japanese. The good Japan, according to this director, is Buddhist monks chatting, ancient temples, flower arrangement; meanwhile she portrays the contemporary Japanese as ridiculous people who have lost contact with their own culture."

All of this would not matter if we, the viewers, are meant to dislike both Bob and Charlotte. However, although they are clearly shown to have flaws, it is just

as clear that we are meant to sympathize with them. Although not perfect, and certainly shown to be shallow, in their encounters with the Japanese, they are the normal ones. After all, who would be willing to spend nearly two hours in a theater watching two characters that they disliked? Bob is trapped in what seems to be an unhappy marriage, and in his phone conversations with his wife, she is portrayed as an almost insufferable nag. Charlotte, as well, has her own marriage troubles, as she is brushed off by her husband, who thinks he can make it up to her by sending faxes with large hearts drawn on them. As she tells a friend on the phone in near tears, "I don't know who I married." We are meant to feel sorry for these characters, and are supposed to sympathize with them as they struggle to cope in a strange land. In doing so, it is all right to laugh when Bob talks about how "black toe" is likely a specialty food in Japan: "See, they love black toe over here....You know, in this country, somebody's gotta *prefer* black toe." Bob says all of this in front of the sushi master, well aware that not a word he is saying is understood, while Charlotte giggles at his wit. It is meant to be a humorous scene; if one were to reverse the situation, however, and have a couple of Japanese patrons do the same thing in a restaurant in New York, it is not likely that American audiences would find the situation quite so amusing.

Fans of *Lost in Translation* defend the above scenes, arguing that the film is not really about Japan in the first place. Rather, it is about the two struggles of two people who find a bit of happiness in each other's company, and in order to make this clear to audiences, everything surrounding the two characters has to be foreign and inaccessible. As such, the film could have taken place in Bangkok, Paris, Moscow, any place, in fact, that was outside the normal realms of Bob and Charlotte. This may be true, but there are ways to make the two characters feel alienated without relying on cheap stereotypes. For instance, having a number of people on the elevators speaking to each other in Japanese while a non-comprehending Bob stands silently would have been just as effective as the silly short people gag. For a foreigner in Japan for the first time, normal Japanese people engaging in everyday activities can be bewildering enough; there is no need to exaggerate the so-called peculiarities of the culture.

Conclusion

If *Lost in Translation* tells us anything, it is that stereotypes and negative portrayals of the Japanese in movies are not just a product of the times in which they are produced. True, no longer do we see Hollywood productions such as *Black Rain* or *Rising Sun*, movies that portray a dark image of Japan enforcing its will upon the United States, and treating Americans with disdain in the process. Furthermore, not all Japanese are portrayed as nerdy workers who desperately need an upgrade in their social skills, such as those in *Gung Ho*.

Lost in Translation is a major improvement over the Japan-themed movies of the 1980s and 1990s. Sadly, however, it shows that in 2003, although times had changed, unfortunate stereotypes remained. Six years later, we are still waiting for the next significant Hollywood movie that portrays contemporary Japanese society. One can only hope that it takes the next step, and shows us a Japan bereft of the negative images that Hollywood stubbornly clings to.

References

1 E. Said, Orientalism, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
2 E. Said, Culture and imperialism, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
3 R. Benedict, The chrysanthemum and the sword, Tokyo: Tuttle, 1946.
4 E. Reischauer, The Japanese today: change and continuity, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
5 E. Weiner, Japanese Racism, In: National Public Radio, 4 September 2001. http://www.npr.org/.
6 T. Larimer, Japan: national colors, Time, 16 August 1999. http://www.time.com/time/archive.
7 P. Dale, The myth of Japanese uniqueness, London: Routledge, 1986.
8 H. Smith, The myth of Japanese homogeneity: social-ecological diversity in education and socialization, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1995.
9 D. Matsumoto, The new Japan: debunking seven cultural stereotypes, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc., 2002.
10 E. Oguma, A genealogy of 'Japanese' self-images, translated from Japanese by David Askew,

Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2002.
11 M. Schilling, 'The last samurai' in Japan, Dish, 29 November 2003. http://japanesemovies.homestead.com/lastsamurai.html.
12 Gung Ho, Motion picture, Paramount Pictures, 1986.
13 Black Rain, Motion picture, Paramount Pictures, 1989.
14 Rising Sun, Motion picture, Twentieth Century Fox, 1993.
15 Lost in Translation, Motion picture, Focus Features, 2003.
16 Chicago Reader, Gung ho. http://onfilm.chicagoreader.com/movies.
17 J. Barron, Huge Japanese realty deals breeding jokes and anger, The New York Times, 18 December 1989. http://www.nytimes.com.
18 G. Friedman and M. Lebard, The coming war with Japan, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
19 S. Ishihara, The Japan that can say no: why Japan will be first among equals, translated from Japanese by Frank Baldwin, USA: Simon & Schuster, 1991.
20 J. Castro, Labor: work ethic–in spades feeling rushed– Time, 17 February 1992. http://www.time.com/time/archive.
21 New York Times, Japanese react angrily to Hollings remark. 5 March 1992. http://www.nytimes.com/.
22 B. Hillenbrand and J. Walsh, Fleeing the past? Time, 2 December 1991. http://www.time.com/time/archive.
23 CBS Evening News, 2 December 1991. In M Quigley, 1992. Innocent Americans, predatory Asians, Fairness and accuracy in reporting. 1992. http://www.fair.org/index.php.
24 S. Greenhouse, 'The fighter' of France: Edith Cresson, New York Times, 16 May 1991. http://www.nytimes.com.
25 M. Shapiro, Is 'Rising Sun' a detective story or Jeremiad? The New York Times, 25 July 1993. http://www.nytimes.com/.
26 N. Morris, Destructive discourse: 'Japan-bashing' in the United States, Australia and Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, Thesis (PhD), Murdoch University, 2006. http://wwwlib.murdoch.edu.au/.
27 E. Fingleton, Blindside: why Japan is still on track to overtake the U.S. by the year 2000, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.
28 I. Hall, Bamboozled: how America loses the intellectual game with Japan and its implications for our future in Asia, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.
29 M. Ventre, "Carson was everyman, with charisma." MSNBC, 23 January 1995. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/.
30 K. Day, Totally lost in translation, The Guardian, 24 January 2004. http://www.guardian.co.uk.